



A COMMEMORATIVE HISTORY  
OF THE  
OSHKOSH PUBLIC LIBRARY LIONS  
“SAWYER AND HARRIS”


AUGUST 11, 1998

## OSHKOSH PUBLIC LIBRARY BUILDING


A free public library for Oshkosh had been approved by a referendum on May 29, 1895 and opened in a room in city hall on April 1, 1896. A permanent and fitting home was to be built with a combination of private and public funds. On May 31, 1898, the Oshkosh City Council voted to bond for \$50,000 to secure the \$75,000 bequest of Mrs. Abbie Harris for the construction of a building for the Oshkosh Public Library.

Marshall Harris was a prominent Oshkosh lumberman who died in 1890. His widow, Abbie Danforth Harris, who died June 24, 1895, used her will to create a trust fund for the library construction and operation. Its conditions required the community to match the bequest within three years of her death. While private fundraising efforts elicited the promise of a \$25,000 gift from former U.S. Senator Philetus Sawyer, sufficient funds were not forthcoming. The women of the Twentieth Century Club were strong supporters of the effort to obtain political support for a city bond issue. With the proceeds from the sale of the bonds and the contribution from Senator Sawyer, the city met the requirements on June 22, 1898.

After six months of debate over the merits of plans submitted by three Oshkosh architects, the City Council finally approved the recommendation of the library's board of directors and its own library committee on December 20, 1898. Well-known local architect William Waters was the choice. The building opened September 3, 1900. According to his contemporaries, Waters envisioned decorative sculpture for the imposing entrance to the building. Initial efforts to include acquisition of sculpted lions in the project budget were not successful, nor was a subsequent effort to have stone lions done.




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## JOHN HICKS

John Hicks, publisher of the *Oshkosh Daily Northwestern*, United States Minister to Peru from 1889-1892 and ambassador to Chile in 1905, public benefactor, and long-time member of the library board, developed a serious interest in public sculpture. He was one of the subscribers to the fund that commissioned busts of Marshall Harris and Philetus Sawyer for the new library in 1899 and himself donated marble busts of George Washington and Benjamin Franklin by Preston Powers to the library in 1902. The Washington bust remains at the library, the Franklin bust is at the Oshkosh Public Museum, transferred there when the museum separated from the library in 1924.



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In 1907 Hicks donated the Soldiers' Monument (adjacent to the Grand Opera House) in memory of his father, a member of the 32<sup>nd</sup> Wisconsin Infantry who died in the Civil War. He developed a friendship with Gaetano Trentanove, an Italian sculptor who worked in the American Midwest, and who sculpted the Soldiers' Monument, then the Hicks Monument to Chief Oshkosh, and the library lions. Trentanove carved a marble bust of John Hicks and donated it to the library at the time of the placement of the lions in 1912.

Hicks also gave a bronze replica of Jean Houdon's statue of George Washington, commissioned a bronze statue of Carl Schurz by Karl Bitter of New York, the Lincoln, Washington, Jefferson, Franklin and Longfellow busts that graced the Oshkosh public schools bearing their names, and a bronze bust of Theodore Roosevelt now at the Oshkosh Public Museum.

Hicks died in 1917, leaving a trust fund of \$25,000 for "the purchase and erection of statues, busts and monuments in the parks and streets of the City of Oshkosh, and the repair of such as are now in existence or may hereafter be erected" and for "the purchase of books, pictures, maps drawings and works of art to be placed in the High School and ward schools of the City of Oshkosh." The fund was to be managed by and under the control of the Board of Directors of the Oshkosh Public Library.


## LIBRARY LIONS

John Hicks commissioned the bronze lions from Gaetano Trentanove and presented them to the Oshkosh Public Library. The pair were put in position on October 7, 1912 and were publicly unveiled Wednesday afternoon, October 9, 1912.


The dedication ceremony itself was brief, but fully reported in the *Oshkosh Daily Northwestern*. J. Howard Jenkins, secretary of the library board presided. President John A. H. Keith of the Oshkosh Normal School presented the lions to the city on behalf of Colonel Hicks. The unveiling was done by President Keith and John Hicks III, grandson of the donor. The gift was accepted on behalf of the city by Mayor John Mulva and on behalf of the library by Carl B. Jackson of the library board. The *Daily Northwestern* reported: "Thought seeds, that promise well for their fructification, were sown in the eloquent speeches of presentation and acceptance. Those who trimmed the dim light of the public library when it was flickering were not forgotten. Its friends of better days received their meed of praise. That strength which the lion symbolizes was prayerfully hoped for, for its future."

The lions are full-sized, standing, and in a majestic pose. The two lions are nearly mirror images of one another, the west lion having its right leg extended, the east lion having its left leg extended. Affectionately known as "Sawyer" and "Harris", they officially received the names in a contest held in 1977. The names appear carved in the stone above the windows behind them, not for the lions, but in honor of the founding donors of the building.

The lions have an overall height of 60 inches, length of 112 inches and width of 20 inches. The bronze bases on which they stand are 2.5 inches high, 99 inches long and 33 inches wide. They are of cast bronze, but the Italian foundry is not known.



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## GAETANO TRENTANOVE

The sculptor Gaetano Trentanove was born on February 21, 1858 in Florence, Italy, the son of a goldsmith. He studied at Florence and Rome and became a member of the fine arts academies of Florence and Parma. According to the *Oshkosh Daily Northwestern* of July 8, 1907, it was through friendships made in Paris that Trentanove came to open a studio in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. He became an American citizen and spent much of his life in Milwaukee while spending part of every year at the studio he maintained in Florence. His American citizenship facilitated the importing of his sculpture.



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His American work included “The Last of the Spartans” which was exhibited in Chicago in 1893 and was purchased for the Milwaukee Museum and was in the collection of the Layton Art Gallery in 1907. In 1894 Trentanove was given the commission for a marble statue of Father Jacques Marquette to be placed in Statuary Hall in the United States Capitol as a representative of the State of Wisconsin. At the same time as the Soldiers’ Monument was being erected in Oshkosh, his sculpture of Governor Nelson Dewey was being placed in Lancaster, Wisconsin and a monument to President McKinley erected at Somerville, New Jersey.

In 1897 Trentanove was created a knight of the Crown of Italy. He retired to Italy where he died on March 13, 1937.



## TWIN TREASURES

Sublime south entrance sentinels  
Proudly perched in prominence  
Sawyer and Harris ever vigilant  
Poised in ferocious forward stance  
Twin treasures gracing Washington  
Though lustre cloaked in verdigris  
Through winter winds and summer sun  
They grandly guard our library  
Eyes once piercing sharp with shine  
Now to softer stares decline  
Leonine features wearing less defined  
Ravaged by the relentless persistence of time  
Well weathered and weary the pair have yet to lay down  
Fatigued paws still standing their green-stained ground  
Noble faces framed with glaucous manes as flowing crowns  
Heavy heads held high suspended in midgowl  
Heed we must that roaring silence as it speaks to us for those  
Whose tails have grown too cumbrous for they themselves to bear  
Restore our hearts and our spirits' splendor  
That we may remain as familiars here


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## 1998 CONSERVATION PROJECT

A local group formed under the Save Outdoor Sculpture program of the Wisconsin Arts Board and the National Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Property (NIC) in the mid-1990s. This conservation project was undertaken after a preliminary assessment by Anton Rajer, a conservator working with the SOS group indicated serious problems with the lions.

In the spring of 1997 the library solicited proposals from firms skilled in assessment and treatment of outdoor bronze sculpture to do a detailed assessment and propose a treatment plan for the lions. Work was to be conducted in accordance with the *Code of Ethics* and *Standards of Practice* of the American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works. Venus Bronze Works, Inc. of Detroit, Michigan, which had done similar work for the Wisconsin State Capitol and in many cities in the Mid-West, was awarded the contract.



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As expected, the assessment revealed substantial deterioration of the lions. Each lion is made up of approximately ten sand-cast sections. In their report the conservators indicated that problems with the original castings lead to joint separations and numerous holes and plugs. Water intrusion into the lions caused rusting of what were presumed to be iron armatures inside the pieces. Rust and investment material, left from casting, leached out of the pieces. Weathering and vandalism also contributed to the problems. Full technical examination and repair was to be done at the Venus Bronze Works facility in Detroit.


After standing guard outside the Oshkosh Public Library since 1912, the two bronze lions were on the move. On Tuesday morning, February 10, 1998, a crane from C. R. Meyer lifted the lions onto an air-ride flat bed truck for transportation to Michigan.

Once in Detroit, the lions underwent a complete physical examination. This included gamma radiographs of each lion which showed casting sand filling the interior almost to the top of the head and receding toward the hindquarters. Openings were made in the bellies of the lions to remove the sand, wet and caked from moisture penetration through holes, separations and cracks. Further examination showed thin areas and other casting defects that necessitated repairs and replacement with modified sections during the original fabrication in 1912.

Treatment included removing all the iron armature and bolts which had rusted and contributed to problems. A new bronze anchoring system replaces iron bolts. New tails were sculpted and cast based on the originals which were vandalized and replaced in the early 1980s. Holes were repaired by inserting bronze rods, cutting them off flush with the surface and working them to conform with the texture of adjacent surfaces. Cracks were also repaired. Surface treatment removed deposits and active corrosion in the interior and on the exterior.


The patina and color were made compatible with the existing weathered patina. An appropriate aged appearance was favored by Trentanove in correspondence with Hicks' successor, O.J. Hardy, in the 1930's when the lions were briefly coated with a gold-colored preparation by a person hired to clean them. The complete technical reports are available for examination in the Administrative Office of the Oshkosh Public Library.

The lions were reinstalled on August 11, 1998.



**PROJECT COST:**  
*Assessment*  
*Phase:*  
**\$1,500**

*Conservation*  
*Phase:*  
**\$26,925**







## LIBRARY LIONS

These bronze creatures appear to roar  
Though not a sound will pierce the air.  
Like Keats' sweet unsung song,  
Their unsounded bellow is forever  
In that eternal moment before release.  
Such silent strength carries far  
And wide.

Unheard by generations, their bronze stillness  
Has made their presence known  
All this century long as they march  
Motionless toward the next.

The lions are ready.

Strong, firm in their direction,  
Not a muscle will flinch. They appear  
About to stride into time.

Anne Hintz  
31 March 1995



## PATRONS

John Hicks Trust Fund \$19,000

Samuel W. and Susan Hardy Heaney Memorial, Oshkosh Foundation \$7,500

Friends of the Oshkosh Public Library \$1,000

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